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SUBJECT: Vietnam on Religious Freedom

REF: A. Hanoi 072 B. 02 STATE 235694

- C. 02 Hanoi 2862 D. 02 Hanoi 2969

1. (SBU) Summary: In two recent meetings with the Ambassador, GVN officials discussed religious freedom issues originally raised by Ambassador Hanford at the November 2002 Human Rights Dialogue in a frank manner, but had little specific information. The most welcome news was that the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam should be able to open its long-anticipated theological school to 50 students in January. Reductions in restrictions on Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do remain possible and Father Nguyen Van Ly's sentence might be reduced as well, based on "good attitude." Officials promised to continue to investigate various problems cited by Ambassador Hanford and Ambassador Burghardt, including an apparently official document describing efforts on renunciations of faith. Officials also indicated the possibility that independent foreign observers might be allowed to investigate problems. While these good discussions were welcome and offer the possibility of Vietnam moving more in the right direction on these issues, concrete GVN actions since Ambassador Hanford's November demarche have been few. End summary.

Expressing USG Concerns

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2. (U) Ambassador met separately with Government Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) Chairman Le Quang Vinh and Deputy Foreign Minister Le Van Bang on January 14 to discuss religious freedom issues initially raised by Ambassador Hanford during the November 8, 2002 US-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue (ref b). He noted that he had also discussed these issues in late November with Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien (ref c).

3. (U) Ambassador noted that concerns about new reported religious freedom problems circulated in the international press had drawn considerable attention, including from members of Congress. Moreover, the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) requires Ambassador Hanford to make recommendations on Country of Particular Concern designation based on the best available information. Even if information was difficult to obtain and verify, the IRFA still required an annual recommendation. Ambassador emphasized that the main purpose of meeting with both Chairman Vinh and DFM Bang was to clarify specific allegations, to determine if the GVN was investigating them, and learn what was being done if the allegations were true.

4. (U) Observing that the GVN was often defensive about religious freedom issues, Ambassador suggested the GVN undertake a more pro-active stance, such as inviting journalists, human rights NGO's, and diplomats freely to investigate reported problems, rather than the GVN issuing blanket denials. The most noteworthy problems recently included reports of house church closings, forced renunciations of faith, disappearances of about 40 Protestant leaders in the Central Highlands as well as others in the Northwest Highlands. Ambassador also asked for any information relevant to allegations that police had beaten Hmong Christian leader Mua Bua Senh a number of times, leading to Senh's eventual death in August 2002.

5. (U) Following up on the Embassy's provision to the CRA in December 2002 of a copy of what was purported to be a Khanh Hoa provincial police document that described efforts to convince citizens to renounce their faith (ref a), Ambassador asked if the CRA had yet investigated the document and, if genuine, if anything had been done to the involved authorities. If the document was false, Ambassador urged the GVN to make this clear as well as to reaffirm that forced renunciations of faith were counter to GVN policy on religious freedom.

6. (U) Ambassador also asked if reports that hundreds of house church closings in the Central Highlands and Northwest Highlands were true. He expressed concern that formal registration remained so difficult that many house churches do not try to register, and urged instead that local authorities provide assistance and encourage registration.

17. (U) Noting that the last congress of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North (ECVN) was in 1988, Ambassador noted that this delay had fueled suspicions that the GVN was afraid that the ECVN would select leaders that the GVN did not like. He urged that the GVN work with the ECVN to encourage it to hold its congress, rather than continue to claim that this delay was due to ECVN internal reasons only.

18. (U) Ambassador noted that one of the most frequent complaints from both Catholics and Protestants was that they do not have enough clergy. He regretted the delays in opening a new Catholic seminary (or seminary branch) in Dong Nai province as well as the theological school of the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) in Ho Chi Minh City; he urged the GVN to provide adequate permission and assistance in the establishment of these overdue and much-needed facilities.

19. (U) Ambassador rejected GVN claims that Vietnam had no religious prisoners, noting that there are clearly prisoners whom people overseas see as religious leaders. He expressed concern that it was almost impossible for foreigners to get information about these prisoners or to meet with them. He offered his personal view that the single best and easiest thing Vietnam could do to gain international respect would be to drop restrictions on highly respected Buddhist leaders Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do so that they might live where they wish, see whom they wish, and do what they want. Regarding prisoner Father Nguyen Van Ly, Ambassador emphasized that GVN stories about Father Ly's personal life were beside the point; regardless, 15 years imprisonment was too long a sentence for doing nothing more than saying something that the GVN did not like. Ambassador asked for assistance in delivering the many Christmas cards he has received for Father Ly.

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GVN Responses  
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10. (U) SECV Theological school: CRA Chairman Vinh assured Ambassador that the SECV would be able to open its theological school in January. He said that he had personally informed the SECV of this after Christmas, following the Prime Minister's approval. The school was currently recruiting students and facility as well as establishing its curriculum, and would be able to admit 50 students. For the time being, however, its student body would be limited due to its temporary location at the SECV headquarters. He claimed that delay in opening had stemmed from Ho Chi Minh City authorities. Separately, DFM Bang appeared to be aware of the decision regarding the SECV theological school, but offered no further comment.

11. (U) New Catholic Seminary: CRA Chairman Vinh explained that the new Catholic seminary in Dong Nai had similarly been held up by the adamant refusal of provincial authorities; the CRA was now encouraging the search for a different site. (Note: Dong Nai authorities have attributed their reluctance to approve the seminary to the lack of provincial educational authorities able to supervise a tertiary-level institution. End note)

12. (U) Persons of concern: Chairman Vinh promised that the CRA would work with the Ministry of Public Security and "higher authorities" to facilitate actions regarding persons of concern such as Thich Huyen Quang, Thich Quang Do, and Father Nguyen Van Ly. He claimed that it should be possible to forward mail to prisoners, including Father Ly. Separately, DFM Bang said that he had heard that Father Ly's attitude in prison had improved, a precondition to reduction in sentence. MFA officials also indicated that they would ask MPS to identify the prison location of Father Ly, and share that information with Embassy. DFM Bang added that MFA was continuing to research the list of persons of concern the Ambassador Hanford provided in August 2002, and agreed to determine whether any of them had been amnestied in 2002.

13. (U) Independent investigations: Chairman Vinh responded positively to the suggestion of inviting journalists, NGO's, and diplomats to investigate reported problems. While he clarified that he could not make decisions about such matters, he promised to recommend the idea to his superiors.

14. (U) Renunciations: Chairman Vinh confirmed that the GVN strictly prohibited discriminatory treatment on religious grounds. He emphasized that a citizen is free to persuade a fellow citizen to adopt or drop a religious belief, but that the State definitely would not do so. He pledged that the GVN would openly address any violations of that policy and would criticize -- or discipline -- any officials guilty of such violations. In answer to Ambassador's question, Vinh claimed that the GVN had actually done so in some cases already, while admitting that

central authorities could not easily inspect and control activities in many remote places. Ambassador urged the GVN to publicize when it punished officials for interfering with citizens' freedom of belief.

15. (U) Khanh Hoa: Chairman Vinh promised to report the information on forced renunciations, including the Khanh Hoa document, to higher authorities. However, he did not respond specifically to the validity of the Khanh Hoa document. DFM Bang did not address the Khanh Hoa document either, but the MFA Americas Department staff requested a copy, which Embassy provided on January 15.

16. (U) Highlands: Both Chairman Vinh and MFA officials described the situation in the Central Highlands and the Northwest Highlands as "special." Chairman Vinh provided a lengthy account of separate efforts to establish a "Dega" state in the Central Highlands and a Hmong kingdom encompassing parts on Vietnam, Laos, China, Thailand, and Burma. Tracing these efforts to FULRO on the one hand and Vang Pao on the other, Vinh claimed that the violent history of these efforts and their current use of "Dega" Protestantism and "Vang Chu" (a Hmong term for Protestantism) "worries" provincial authorities. MFA officials echoed these points in less detail. Ambassador noted that, although only a few people seemed to be involved in these movements, local authorities appeared to treat all Protestants in these areas the same regardless of whether they had anything to do with the separatist groups. This probably had the negative effect of driving more people into these movements. Chairman Vinh replied that central authorities had spoken "many times" with local officials about the need to respect religion. While the State was working hard to ensure respect for "those who practice religion with pure intent," it could not ignore those who "use religion as a cover for political conspiracies."

17. (U) Mua Bua Senh: Chairman Vinh claimed that he was not aware of the case of Mua Bua Senh, but promised that he would contact local authorities. He expressed disbelief that Senh had been beaten just because of his religion.

18. (U) ECVN: Chairman Vinh explained that, although the ECVN is small, it had two factions that sued each other after the last ECVN congress over a financial issue. Until that dispute was resolved, Vinh claimed, it would not be possible to hold another congress. He rejected Ambassador's suggestion that the ECVN settle the dispute at a congress, because the settlement and congress must happen "according to law." He added that the situation was further muddled by "unqualified" persons who claim to be "authorized voices" as well as evangelists within the ECVN. He noted that CRA officials recently traveled to help provincial authorities sort out who was and who was not an ECVN official. Vinh emphasized that the CRA indeed wanted the ECVN to hold a congress and was trying to be supportive.

19. (SBU) Hanford demarche: DFM Bang said that the MFA was investigating the four points Ambassador Hanford highlighted during the November 2002 Human Rights Dialogue. He invited Ambassador Hanford to visit Vietnam again. He noted that it was also important to keep in sight how the overall religious situation in Vietnam had improved over the last ten years. He revealed that the CPV Central Committee had discussed how to work out religious issues over the long-term during the second session of its seventh plenum, which began on January 13. This was unprecedented, he claimed, and showed how seriously CPV and GVN authorities were about further improving the situation of religious freedom. He noted that CPV General Secretary Nong Duc Manh had acknowledged that one-fourth of the Vietnamese population followed religion, and that religion had strong beneficial effect on the youth. He pointed out Vietnam's relations with the Vatican were much better than China's, and that Vietnam had a great deal more religious freedom than countries like Saudi Arabia.

20. (SBU) Comment: These two meetings were the broadest and most candid on the subject of religion that Ambassador has conducted with GVN officials since his arrival over one year ago. The increasing willingness of the GVN to engage in a discussion as detailed as this would have been unthinkable not too many years ago. They had some solid good news on the SECV theological school and indicated new signs of flexibility about investigating other areas of concern. This offers the possibility of Vietnam moving in the right direction on these issues. That said, Ambassador Hanford's own demarche to the GVN delegation in November should have set the ball in motion about addressing our main concerns, but there does not appear to have been much significant movement in the intervening months in response.  
PORTER